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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000768

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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S VIEW OF VIENNA TALKS ON WESTERN SAHARA

REF: ALGIERS 764

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Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Algerian Minstate for Africa and the Maghreb Abdelkader Messahel, Algeria's representative at the Vienna informal talks on the Western Sahara, told us August 14 that the talks were generally civil and constructive, and that the parties to the dispute agreed to further meetings in a yet to be defined format. The Algerians, he said, retain confidence in UNSYG Personal Envoy Christopher Ross, whom he described as extremely knowledgeable about the region and the mindset of the parties. Messahel did not miss the opportunity to reiterate the usual litany against Morocco's Western Sahara position and the strained bilateral relations between Algiers and Rabat. But he concluded that the mood departing Vienna was generally optimistic and that the USG could play a major role in ensuring the parties respect UN resolutions on the issue. END SUMMARY.

ALGERIA SAW VIENNA TALKS AS CIVIL AND CONSTRUCTIVE

12. (C) Algerian Minister of State for Africa and the Maghreb Abdelkader Messahel on August 14 gave a visiting Capstone delegation his impressions of the Vienna informal talks on the Western Sahara. Messahel represented Algeria at the talks, and he said he had just returned to Algeria the evening prior to the meeting and that we were the first foreign representatives to hear the Algerian readout. Messahel called the atmosphere of the talks civil and constructive, noting that they had been a productive beginning to further dialogue, although he stressed that there is still a great divergence regarding the positions of the parties, i.e., Morocco's insistence on autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the sole basis for a settlement juxtaposed against Polisario's insistence that a referendum is the only means to achieve a solution consistent with the principle of self-determination. Ross, he said, was going about things step by step.

WESTERN SAHARA SOURS ALGERIA-MOROCCO TIES, REGIONAL
INTEGRATION

13. (C) Messahel used familiar language to lament what he described as Morocco's irrational fear of allowing the Sahrawi to vote for self-determination, given that Moroccans now constitute the majority of the population in the Western Sahara. Messahel also said the Polisario remain ready to pick up where the Baker Plan left off and simply want the right to choose between integration with Morocco, autonomy within Morocco, or independence from Morocco. He said Algeria would support whichever option the Sahrawis themselves genuinely decide.

14. (C) Messahel also reviewed the bilateral tensions that

led to the current closed border with Morocco and complained that Algeria was invaded by drugs coming from the Moroccan side. He pointed out, however, that Morocco is Algeria's largest trading partner in the Maghreb and noted that 45,000 Moroccans live in Algeria while a half-million Algerians visit Morocco each year for tourism. He also highlighted ongoing areas of engagement, such as the delivery of gas to Morocco via the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline and a pending Maghreb-wide electrical power strategy. Ultimately, he said, the question of Western Sahara "mars the climate in the region," affecting not only the bilateral relationship between Algeria and Morocco but delaying consolidation of the Arab Maghreb Union.

OPTIMISM MOVING FORWARD UNDER ROSS

15. (C) Messahel said Algeria has great confidence in Ross because he has a firm understanding of the region and the issues at hand as well as an understanding of the thought processes of the parties to the conflict and the neighboring states. He said he had spoken with the Polisario representatives in Vienna, whom he described as leaving the meeting with a positive impression of the overall climate in which the discussions occurred. Messahel concluded that the overall mood of the meetings had been optimistic and that the parties agreed to continue a dialogue, although it was unclear if that would be in the context of further informal talks or a resumption of the Manhasset-style direct negotiations. Messahel finished by asserting that the USG could play a major role in ensuring that the parties "respect UN resolutions."

COMMENT

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16. (C) It is noteworthy that Messahel flew straight to Algiers from the Vienna talks in order to have a chance to meet with the US delegation. Furthermore, he set the meeting for a Friday morning, which is highly unusual, and another indicator of the importance he attached to the opportunity to address high-level USG visitors in the wake of the Vienna sessions. Messahel embodies the hardline Algerian position on this dispute and was predictably firm in outlining the Algerian commitment to support for the Sahrawis' right of self-determination. He told the group, "You started the notion of self-determination in your Constitution." But, with that marker on substance, Messahel was also at considerable pains to be upbeat on the process, complimenting Ross's initial work, and describing the Vienna informals as both civil and constructive. End Comment.

17. (U) Tripoli minimize considererd.

PEARCE